

## Mahā, purisa Sutta

### The Discourse on the Great Man

[Who is truly great?]  
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 47.11/5:158)  
Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

#### Introduction: “The great man”

From the context of **the Anuruddha Mahā, vitakka Sutta** (A 3.80),<sup>1</sup> especially the Buddha’s “eighth thought of the great man” [§3(8)], it is clear that “the great man” or “the great person” (*mahā, purisa*) here refers to an arya or noble saint (*ariya*), that is, a saint of the path, particularly the arhat.<sup>2</sup> In the Commentaries, the word *mahā, purisa*, however, is always used in reference to the Bodhisattva, that is, the Buddha before his awakening (from his first public aspiration for Buddhahood onwards).<sup>3</sup>

**The Cūḷa Niddeśa**, commenting on the Tissa Metteyya Māṇava Pucchā (Sn 1040-42) simply gives a string of synonyms and near-synonyms, thus: *mahā, puriso agga, puriso seṭṭha, puriso viṣeṭṭha, puriso pāmokkha, puriso uttama, puriso padhāna, puriso* (the great person, the foremost person, the excellent person, the supreme person, the highest person, the main person).<sup>4</sup>

The Canon itself, however, provides at least two important texts directly illuminating the meaning of *mahā, purisa*, that is, **the Tissa Metteyya Māṇava Pucchā** (Sn 1040-42) and **the Mahā, purisa Sutta** (S 47.11). The first text, the question of the brahmin youth Tissa Metteyya to the Buddha, forms part of the ancient Pārāyana Vagga of the Sutta Nipāta.

**1040** *Ko’ dha santusito loke*  
(*icc-āyasmā Tisso Metteyyo*)  
*kassa no santi iñjītā*  
*ko ubh’ antam abhiññāya*  
*majjhe mantā na lippati*  
*kaṃ brūsi mahā, puriso ti*  
*ko idha sibbanim accagā.*

Who is contented in this world?  
(asks the venerable Tissa Metteyya,  
for whom are there no mental agitations?  
Who, knowing both ends [extremes],  
is a thinker, who clings not to the middle?  
**Whom do you call a great person?**  
Who has gone beyond the seamstress<sup>5</sup> here?

**1041** *Kāmesu brahma, cariyavā*  
(*Metteyyā ti Bhagavā*)’  
*vīta, taṇho sadā sato*  
*saṅkhāya nibbuto bhikkhu*  
*majjhe mantā na lippati*

Who lives the holy life [is celibate] amidst sense-pleasures,  
(Metteyya, said the Blessed One,)  
with craving gone, ever mindful,  
after considering,<sup>6</sup> he is a quenched monk,  
a thinker who sticks not to the middle—

<sup>1</sup> A 8.30/4:228-235 = SD 19.5.

<sup>2</sup> The other 3 types of saints are the stream-winner, the once-returned and the non-returned. For details, see **Kiṭṭhā-giri S** (M 70 = SD 11.1).

<sup>3</sup> DA 2:426-442, 3:920; MA 2:79, 3:67, 4:189; SA 1:322, 2:115, 117, 242; AA 1:145, 2:237, 237, 240, 4:76; DhA 1:81, 313, 2:45; SnA 1:184, 187 f, 223, 258, 357, 384, 392. On the list of mythical 32 “characteristics of the great man” (*mahā, purisa lakkhaṇa*), see SD 3.14(8)n.

<sup>4</sup> Nc:Be 34 = Nc:Se 41. The Cūḷa Niddeśa Comy similarly merely gives the lexical meanings of these words in turn (NcA 10).

<sup>5</sup> “The seamstress” (*sibbani*) here is a personification of craving (*taṇhā*) (A 3:399; DhA 1059; NcA 10). The seamstress (or seamster = tailor) puts together clothing just as craving brings together the conditions for one’s continued being and suffering.

<sup>6</sup> Ie after considering impermanence, etc (SnA 589 = NcA 10). Following the Suttas, *saṅkhāya* here better refers to mindful reflection by way of proper attention (*apassena*): see **Saṅgīti S** (D 33), where a monk lives supported by (*apassena*) considering what is to be habitually used (*paṭisevati*), what is to be endured (*adhivāseti*), what is to be avoided (*parivajjeti*), and what is to be removed (*vinodeti*) (D 33.1.11(8)/3:224). For details, see **Naḷaka, pāna S** (M 68.7/1:464) = SD 37.4. Cf D 3:279, 1-5 & M 1:464, 13-15.

*taṃ brūmi mahā, puriso ti  
so idha sibbanim accagā 'ti.*

**Him I call a great man—**  
he has gone beyond the seamstress here.

Although there seems to be five questions here by Tissa Metteyya, they all converge on the key question: “Whom do you call a great person?” The Buddha answers accordingly.<sup>7</sup>

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## The Discourse on the Great Man

(S 47.11/5:158)

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha, piṇḍika’s Park in Jeta’s Grove near Sāvattī.

### Who is a great man?

2 Then the venerable Sāriputta approached the Blessed One and saluted him. Having saluted the Blessed One, he sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, the venerable Sāriputta said this to the Blessed One:

3a “Great man, great man,’ it is said, venerable sir. **How, venerable sir, is one a great man?**”

“One who has a liberated mind, I say, Sāriputta, is a great man. One who has an unliberated mind is not a great man, I say.

### The four satipatthanas

3a **And how, Sāriputta, does one have a liberated mind?**

4 Here, Sāriputta,

(1) a monk<sup>8</sup> dwells<sup>9</sup> exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the body in the body,<sup>10</sup> removing<sup>11</sup> covetousness and displeasure<sup>12</sup> in the world.<sup>13</sup>

As he dwells contemplating *the body in the body*, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See **The Body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (7.2).

<sup>8</sup> Here “a monk” (*bhikkhu*) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 §3.0(ii).

<sup>9</sup> *Ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*. Here we find 4 of the 5 spiritual faculties (*pañc’-indriya*) in action: see **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 Intro (4.2) above.

<sup>10</sup> “Contemplating the body in the body” (*kāye kāyānupassī*). See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 Intro (3.4).

<sup>11</sup> *Vineyya* can mean “should remove” (as pot, like *vineyya*, Sn 590) or as “having removed” (as ger, like *vina-ivā*, Pm 1:244), and both senses apply in **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10 = SD 13.3). See Intro (4.2c) above.

<sup>12</sup> “Covetousness and displeasure,” *abhijjhā, domanassaṃ*, alt trs: “desire and discontent,” “desiring and disliking,” or “longing and loathing.” Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as “hankering and fretting [for the world].” See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 Intro (4.2).

<sup>13</sup> “World” (*loka*). See Intro (4.2d) above.

<sup>14</sup> “**Cankers**” or mental cankers (*āsava*), comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as influxes, taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists **four āsavas**: the canker of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjā’sava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of 3 cankers (omitting the canker of views) [43] is probably older and is found

(2) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating feelings in the feelings, having removed covetousness and displeasure in the world.

As he dwells contemplating *feelings in the feelings*, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.

(3) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the mind in the mind, removing covetousness and displeasure in the world.

As he dwells contemplating *the mind in the mind*, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.

(4) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating dharmas [phenomena] in the dharmas, removing covetousness and displeasure in the world.

As he dwells contemplating *dharmas in the dharmas*, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.

**5** Thus, Sāriputta, one has a liberated mind. One who has a liberated mind, I say, Sāriputta, is a great man. One who has an unliberated mind is not a great man, I say. **[159]**

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more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these āsavas is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.